

# Chasing after Ghosts

*A critique of anarchist organizing, and its  
worst contradictions,  
in the North American context*

*In the spire, the birds assemble.  
The black marks have begun  
on the windows of the tower—  
rumors and rumors,  
and a few gnarled hands have found  
the brass hooks and the clamps,  
the ash and powder. We thought  
them lost in buried closets  
in the belfry, where kisses turn to slavish shouts,  
static grinds, sound waves clipped and torn.*



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among anarchists, abandoning the election-hall farce of attempting to convince or convert the other, and finding common ground where we can, without lumping all into the “big tent” that blunts the edge of all disagreements, creating false notions of consensus.

To recognize that even if today we shirk risks, seek pleasure and the familiar, and assure ourselves in the necessity of certain roles and forms of support—that anarchist struggle is ultimately not a creature of comfort, that opposing domination demands courage, and that context is only relevant insofar as we fail to change it—but that changing one’s context is not the same thing as erasing or ignoring it, pretending that historical conditions are purely mythical, pretending that any action in any place at any time is the full depth of an anarchist approach to resistance.

To move beyond the realization of failures, to imagine and create forms of resistance we desire, to bulldoze the inhibitions that keep us back— from who we want to be, how we want to act, the relations we wish to have, the new forms of self-organization before unseen and unimagined, the flames of revolt appearing in new colors and places, the cackles of an unrepentant will to liberty bouncing between the empty shells of skyscrapers.

Ever deeper into the night, the moon gazing down on free-willed insurgents dancing on a graveyard of old contracts and the rotten hulks of a thousand faces of domination—humans learning to become wolves.

In seeing technology manifest as a social relation, and innovation as a form of constructed dependency; breaking down barriers of mediated interaction; building affinities, community, solidarity and struggle out of real physical space and relating; but not as a rejection of the hardware itself (even if many of us would like that), and all the while maintaining that we ought use all tools at our disposal as long as they are useful.

Entering the debate over social media's role in struggle, not to vote or choose sides, but to demolish the entire context in which such questions arise. Knowing that new technologies can be useful to resistance, yet always contesting the tyranny of necessity, that the ends sought through certain means may always be pursued through other channels, that usefulness can only go so far, and that a framework of domination does not cease to dominate when it becomes a tool for insurgents.

Toward the establishment and proliferation of spaces, not for the pure quantity of such spaces, nor to reinforce the ubiquitous image of an imaginary "anarchist movement," but as space to discuss, to share ideas and techniques, to meet each other, to connect different struggles and circles, to render public radical ideas and critiques, beyond the limited space of people who already know each other. Not for some pure value of anarchists knowing other anarchists, but for the affinities, the acts and initiatives that may come out of such encounters.

To recognize that anarchist space is neither limited nor defined by names, signs, numbers, rent paid or square footage; that physical space has a use, much as webspace, or newspaper space, but that what is sought is space opened between individuals, space created for sharing and strengthening of ideas, sharpening of skills, forming of complicities and acting, alone and together, in armed defiance to the world. Such space cannot be measured or counted, and can only be known by the force of sentiment we unearth in ourselves.

To openly discuss and debate different tendencies and tensions

*The thrust of this critique is not pointed towards individual convictions, ideas and desires. As always, the greater the scope of our generalizations, the more exceptions we leave outside. These are responses to general trends and tendencies observed in the North American<sup>1</sup> anarchist milieu. It is quite likely that many of these trends do exist elsewhere in the world, as do many products of American culture. That being said, I believe that many of these tendencies are particularly North American, even if their resonance is felt beyond these borders. Many of these statements and points have been said elsewhere, at different times and by different voices. The point lies that critiques ill-heard bear repeating. Will some be offended, feel targeted? I hope that if this is the case, those offended will not take their indignation as an excuse to throw this piece in the garbage, to rail against it. We are already too few, and too isolated. Yet no numbers or figures could be justification for silence. Cooperation and camaraderie in struggle become meaningless if they are conditional on thin-lipped nodding and pats on the back, if they refuse reflection and debate. Forgive the assumption, but we did not become anarchists in an effort to seek support and acceptance on all sides, to paint glue over cracks and inconsistencies. To be cliché, radical means seeking out the roots of any problem, situation, social or political form. If we cannot see aspects of society that are reproduced in our own circles, then any attempt at radical change is hopeless, no matter how large or how militant. That, or the more radical consequences of the anarchist project will be taken up by others before they are taken up by anarchists themselves. Of course, this is already happening, as it has happened before.*

*Lastly, if your response to this text is merely, 'but we're working hard!' then accept the response that any good boss will give you. 'Work harder.'*

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<sup>1</sup>United States and Canada. Because there is a context that exists that is more than the addition of these two countries, but that is, of course, quite different in Mexico.

iors, that there is no “free” system to replace a system of exploitation, no laws that liberate to replace laws that coerce. Creating informal hierarchies of awareness and sensitivity serves largely to build higher walls around already isolated cliques, when fighting any coercive structure, internal or external, requires thought and exploration, time and will.

To break down barriers of insecurity and discomfort, codes of behavior and presentation, the self-loathing and judgment that we are socialized into, that exist as much in radical scenes as in mainstream society. Accounting for the coercion that defines “normal” self-expression, we see the openings to act differently, to define our social and individual lives, our personae and possibilities. Seeing the madness and courage that lie on the fringes of our social relations, leaping into risk and the unknown with a hunger to rip through limits previously accepted, as easily questioned as destroyed.

In being willing to be vulnerable, breaking down barriers within ourselves, building relationships where we can grow stronger together, in support and critique, in ideas and action. Recognizing that force and confidence do not come from the ease of patterns and habits, the comforts of predictable relationships where “everything is fine,” the pleasures of shallow compliments and meaningless connections—but from the raw, uncontainable desire to communicate, the knowledge that sheer honesty and unflinching debate are in the end so much more than a thousand forms of consensus, that such communications are a natural bridge into acting.

The joy in bursting subordinate roleplay is contagious—tearing out of the roles and frames we’ve been conditioned to revisit all our lives—not only in explicitly submissive roles, as the whole game requires a great deal of internalized repression, even in the role of leader or dominant. Deep relations may blur the bounds of individuals, while never making us weaker, ever combating the armed categories of friendship and love relations—the shallow choices and limits society offers us for lasting affinities, categories which will not disappear merely because we wish it.

interests, critiques, strategies and tactics to share. And simultaneously, learning to act as anarchists in the absence of social movements, creating and pushing conflict and self-organization in periods of low struggle, avoiding the trap of playing reformist in order to build a social movement.

To organize with broader groups of individuals to oppose specific developments or projects, on the condition of permanent conflictuality against the project, of no negotiations with the state, strong stances against police intervention, against collaboration, against snitching, and in solidarity with individuals targeted for repression, imprisoned, etc. To challenge widespread anti-neoliberal and anti-globalization perspectives, take apart myths of a better capitalist past, to defend the facts that exploitation, colonialism and ecological devastation are nothing new, that revamped state regulations and “green” business will not serve to create a free, just or sustainable world—and that the DIY, self-styled autonomous version of these ideas is little better, offering us some pieces of a theorized “post-capitalist” world, with no notions of how to create such a world.

To study the proper use of a sledgehammer, the specific fragility of machines and materials, the futility of too few eyes spread too thin to effectively watch anything, in face of a patient, practiced opposition. To spread techniques and tools for sabotage and expropriation, attacking the properties of the rich, bosses, gentrifiers, developers, and other scum. To attack property and capital, the state and its police, with all the means available to us—as much in the virtual realm as the physical, as much in actions as discourses, as much in hidden offices as the streets, as much in words and passion as in tooth and claw, fire and paint, poison and brick.

To fight patriarchy, white supremacy and other forms of racial hierarchy, sexual norms and other abject features of our socialization; these things via direct confrontation, in communication, and in self-reflection, never forgetting the self-destructive consequences of guilt. To know that destroying systems of domination cannot pass by tacit agreement to a uniform code of certain anti-oppressive behav-

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“not radical enough,” even from discussion. There is no anarchist movement as such, and we are better without the hopes contained in such illusions. The notion of building a widespread movement is a perfect self-defeating strategy. Instead, we might focus on spreading revolt.

Covering the streets with anarchist propaganda, with ink, paint, and glue, with words that express the fullness of a struggle against domination, that are comprehensible and free of academic and subcultural jargon. As well, messages that emphasize existing social tensions and render them impossible to ignore, that express solidarity with the exploited and excluded, and that urge on self-organization, autonomy and conflict with the dominant classes.

Production and diffusion of texts to inspire revolt and class antipathy, expose and underline structures of domination and oppression, and give tools and ideas for resistance and sabotage. Diffusion: not just anarchist websites, infoshops, and pseudo-radical spaces, but also metros, buses, schools, cafés, fast food joints, bookstores, libraries, street fairs, markets, places of work. As long as the thrust of radical propaganda is join us (at the infoshop, at the demo, etc.), we are forever in a position of weakness, burdened by the same curse as the panhandler or OXFAM solicitor. We are not seeking conscripts or recruits, but comrades in struggle. Here we speak of text, but the same ideas can and ought be applied to other media: music, photos, art, and video.

Willingness to act within moments of revolt or popular aggression against property, police, the architecture of the city, the state, etc., not as distant supporters but as accomplices in the shared desire to destroy what makes us miserable—and hence, to understand solidarity not as a vague term but as a tangible bond.

Desire and preparedness to intervene in broader social movements and struggles, strikes, occupations, mass demonstrations, blockades—not as mute supporters and allies, but as anarchists—interested in the growth and strength of such movements, with our own

Alternately, the impassioned insurrectionist, disillusioned with an anarchist current that has already given up, turning to arson, bombings, armed struggle; perhaps inspired by Jensen's philosophy in which a small number of people, skilled, intelligent and capable of carrying out "strategic actions" can bring down civilization by themselves. We don't think a small number of people, no matter how skilled or dedicated, can face and defeat the state, capitalism, or civilization by themselves. However, the widespread activist discourse that tags armed struggle as desperate, isolationist, and doomed to fail, serves only to create further divisions and enforce our sense of weakness. It says we are not ready yet, we do not have a strong enough movement to support armed groups or arson. Yet we don't ask the question, how a "movement" that refuses combativeness beyond the occasional counter-summit or black bloc (and even then...), will ever become strong enough to support armed actions? And how does this differ from the sleeping Marxists, ever still waiting for the revolution?

## IX.

The question stands. What directions remain toward ends that we desire as anarchists? And to formulate a more preliminary question: if there is no path straight to a world free of domination, what directions lead toward an expansive struggle, toward relations that fulfill us, not in isolation from society but in conflict with it, toward actions that identify the structures of domination, and not merely some bad apples; toward a force that opposes and attacks the state and capital, patriarchy and privilege, alienation and representation—not in certain forms that appear new or more atrocious, but in all their forms; toward an assault that is an open invitation, but not a compromise?

At base, we need an orientation toward and desire to fight. A desire to build struggle out of broad lines of opposition, a willingness to express anti-authoritarian critiques; neither hiding radical ideas in a patronizing effort to work with other groups, nor an elitist clique-based tendency to act only with other anarchists, excluding those

## I.

The anarchist current in North America (esp. the US) has all the trappings of a social movement, without the movement. The what of a social struggle, with little to no conception of the how, or the why. We ask ourselves what makes sense in terms of action and organizational form, with little attention given to the context, or the conditions in which it makes sense to do anything at all. We seek blanket solutions, models and forms, things that could be applied everywhere—and are effective nowhere. We build models for resistance and solidarity, with no concept of how these things could be weapons. We seek answers where there is merely the silent face of the world that confronts us.

We have isolated attacks and acts of sabotage. We have groups supporting those targeted by repression, suspected, charged, convicted and locked up for acts of resistance. Yet even these seem to have shrunk within recent years. We have occasional black blocs and convergences, nearly each time preceding a fallout replete with months of debate and venom over what we call tactics.

And beyond? We have punks serving oddly textured stews in public parks, wondering why on earth people don't eat their food. We have groups meeting in dingy union offices and campus-based non-profits. We have infoshops in towns and cities all over the place, opening, closing, opening, closing. We have teenagers doing the same things we did five, ten, twenty years ago, and still we are unaware of each other. We had an anti-war movement to try to "push" in a radical direction, and now we don't even have that. We speak of the necessity of working together with liberals, when we can barely work together amongst ourselves.

We have crew changes, maps and enough hitchhiking stories to fill the Library of Congress. We have armies of friends and houseguests and "do your own dishes" signs above the sink.

Where we could have relationships, we have internet forums. Where

we could have meaningful debate, we have mud-slinging. Where we could analyze liberal (and other forms of) dogma, we remain silent, only to talk shit later. Where we could deepen critiques of social movements and struggles, we seek “openness” and “diversity of opinion,” as if liberals will be tricked into becoming anarchists by our non-threatening discourse.

When we could gain understanding and perspective from particular struggles, in North America or abroad, too often we instead find only fetishism. When we could develop techniques with intent, when we could prepare, learn, adapt, and expand upon moments of resistance, we instead rush into ill-defined situations with ill-formed expectations (*viz.* to view rioting as a tactic, and not an event)—only to repeat the same process at the next opportunity.

We often see theory as a thing of the past. When we could be striving to understand the context we live in, and what it means to us as anarchists, we instead turn to ideas and modes from a hundred years’ past, as if there still exists a labor movement today, or even workers, as such; or, we shut out theory entirely, seeing it as a foreign and near-imperial imposition on “the movement” itself. As if acting without reflection, repetition of certain events and organizing forms, and a proliferation of different groups to address every minor aspect and consequence of the society we live in today, will inevitably drive domination out of our world—like a miracle in kitchen chemistry.

Where we encounter intellectualism, too often we reject it in favor of simplistic and “accessible” dogmas, or embrace it on the assumption that all thought is by nature intellectual—when we could be attacking the ivory tower from a position of thought, reflection, self-critique, and confidence in our own ideas.

Where there is capital, power and repression, we see an ever-growing tide of issues, each one demanding its own unique organized response.

Where issue-based organizing is critiqued, we hear the same re-

realize it. We cannot hide from the fact that, although in certain contexts we may find many sympathetic to anarchist analysis or tactics, in the bigger picture many if not most people are hostile to revolutionary ideas. Yet to turn inward, to avoid communicating beyond anarchist or other counter-cultural scenes, is the worst mistake. We may seek accomplices where we can, and assert anti-authoritarian perspectives where they are not already a known quantity (with a willingness to explain and defend them), all the while deepening the affinities we have, and acting together.

Compare these notions to another example, in which a radical environmental group composed mainly of anarchists, attempting to expand its base of support in a certain campaign, makes links to various mainstream environmental groups who are opposing the same timber sale. In content, it is similar: anarchists fighting against a certain project going beyond their own scene to build allies for the struggle. However, this interaction occurs entirely in the political sphere, between organizations and people already aligned, already “politically active” in one way or another. The possibility for this struggle to spill out of the “activist” sphere, to grow and spread, to become conscious of its strength, to find new terrains of struggle, or to directly confront the state and capital in themselves—is effectively nil.

Of course, an encompassing social revolution is a terribly distant and unlikely possibility. Without completely renouncing our desire for it, we have to face our tangible context, and work with the reality we live in. (Even in a more revolutionary context, we could not ignore the deep rifts that exist among anarchists—to wit, it is not any anti-state social revolution that will yield the world in which we wish to live, though greater explanation is beyond the scope of this critique.) Jokes about “the rev” may be funny for a while, but self-denigrating humor is rarely constructive in the long run. Faced with the seemingly monolithic impossibility of revolution, we often fall into either pessimistic apathy, nihilist abandon, or a compromised notion of struggle as damage control—complete with a cognitive dissonance to ignore the futility of combating domination on the whole through a proliferation of reforms and safe spaces.



What does this mean? Is this not already common practice? It might seem. However, by seeking complicity outside of a certain political strain, we don't mean anarchists joining mainstream activist or community groups, or seeking allies in leftist or reformist organizations. For anarchists to work with organizations only serves to reinforce the notion of anarchists as activists, as political specialists, removed and distant from the everyday lives of proletarians, immigrants, indigenous, marginalized people generally. To struggle for the exploited, while removing oneself from their (and our own) day-to-day life, is to reproduce the same kind of representation we see in the media and in politics, while drifting always farther from concrete practices of autonomy and solidarity.

More concretely: for anarchists to seek complicity outside their circles in struggles against police or surveillance, in sabotage of pay-booths, in attacking development projects, is to recognize a common interest in living safe from police violence and repression, a common desire not to be watched everywhere, a desire not to pay always more and more to go work, study or visit friends or family; a desire not to be surrounded always by more rich people, paying higher rents, facing more frequent patrols, increased vigilance against graffiti, loitering, drug use, soliciting, or the simple crimes of being young, poor, of color, or in some way a sore thumb sticking out of the developer's vision of a safe, clean, proper city.

In this way, complicity means recognizing that much of society is oppressive, alienating and hateful to many people in this world; that it doesn't require an anarchist as Platonic hero to "see the light of truth." And recognizing that many of the things we love, the autonomy and self-determination we hunger for so fervently, are not bizarre fetishes uniquely valued by anarchists.

Solidarity means finding these complicities, these points of tension where exist already partisans beyond our own circles. At the same time, it means not stretching the anti-authoritarian elements that exist outside of politicized scenes into broad fictions, telling ourselves that people are intrinsically anarchist, or anti-capitalist, and just don't

sponse screamed: *I will not wait until after your revolution...!* As if we must each have our own unique, pre-packaged revolution. As if my revolution is right around the corner. To say that most forms of oppression and exploitation could be eradicated through non-revolutionary means, through mere organizing—or worse yet, advocacy.

After Fredy Villanueva's murder at the hand of pigs, in the wake of mass rioting in Montréal-Nord, Montréal anarchists sought representatives of local organizations in an effort to build "alliances of solidarity."

In the absence of solid communities, we create semblances, as if certain events or institutions could make a community; hence taking on the worst characteristics of *intentional communities* (insularity, distrust or distaste for the "outside world," self-congratulation and an inflated sense of comfort, protracted internal arguments remaining forever invisible and irrelevant to the uninitiated), nearly always indistinguishable from cults to the outside observer. In so doing, we absorb the colonizer's mentality of always seeking representatives and forms, ever blind to the thing itself, ignorant of the relations that truly form a community. We find ourselves barely cognizant of one major consequence of modern society, the rabid destruction of communities. All the while shouting no cops in our communities!, but never asking: what community?

We are wordless to speak of alienation, as if weekly meetings and collective houses are some sort of cure-all; no surprise that we grow ever more irrelevant to people who feel the visceral pains of exploitation and self-hatred, whose only answer to their rage is a growing detachment from the world.

We see impassioned comrades disappearing from "the scene," absorbed in work life or home life, in substances and depression. Or turning to clandestinity, arson and bombings through uncontrollable impatience for a self-styled movement that fails to move anything. (Not to dismiss these actions, but the desperation that sometimes motivates them.) And when these rifts are addressed, it is only

through reactive measures: support for prisoners and people on trial, mental health collectives, external projects and efforts to “stay in contact” with or support older comrades and those who have left the scene. The notion of solidarity has disappeared, or returns as a mere specter, a word with no weight or substance, much like *anti-globalization* or *people power*.

We critique institutions of power through one side of the mouth, with the other speaking of the need to build our own institutions, ignoring the dynamics of power that will infect any institution.

We speak of actions and dynamics at home and in our spaces, always in contrast to what we do as anarchists in the “outside world”—as if we are missionaries to an idea, and must represent this idea to others, as if we must maintain two protocols and two standards, as if we cannot merely *be anarchists*, and act accordingly.

We speak of eradicating oppression in our communities, as if oppression is created merely by individuals, by choices, behaviors and social dynamics, and not also by capitalism, by cities, by the state and by technology.

We speak of solidarity as a special commodity, reserved for token groups of people, and not a basic and fundamental anarchist principle, essential to all forms and aspects of our struggle.

We speak of many things, often forgetting what it is to listen. We read and read, forgetting that learning is not a matter of social credibility, that anarchism is not a quantity.

We swallow social capital and alienated relations hook, line and sinker, digging ever deeper into our cliques’ private trenches, making a hollow joke out of the word “expansive.” Meanwhile, we dismiss attempts to challenge the way we are socialized to relate and interact as “lifestyle anarchism.” Or we address the issues around relationships and interactions in the most alienated way, through categories and specialized terms, all the while reinforcing the solid walls

## VIII.

Where can we go from here? What paths draw out into the abyss, dovetailing toward insurrections, revolutions, space to breath and think, communities where we can be ourselves, without fear of pigs or perpetrators, relations strong enough to hold the torrent of our desires?

As anarchists we cannot reject these bigger notions, these more distant articulations of a world free of domination. And yet to linger too long on these horizons, we run ever the greater risk of drowning, or drifting so far beyond this world that we lose sight of land. We mustn’t grow too lost in our utopian fantasies that we lose the ability to communicate, to relate, to collaborate with those whose views differ from our own, however slightly or greatly. Yet neither can we allow ourselves to fall into the trap of realism and practicality, sacrificing values for a handful of change, a slightly better wage, a less murderous police state, a prison cell to oneself.

This goes merely to describe one tension that we live as anarchists, whether we choose to own up to it or not. It does not offer us anything, beyond the space opened for reflection. It is the same as with any purely negative critique; there is no prescription, no list of possible actions. Such a critique merely opens space to breath where have lived illusions, repetitions, false notions of satisfaction or progress. Yet to overcome such obstacles is already an accomplishment.

However, nothing stops here. In dispelling an attachment to ineffectual tactics, it is up to us to surpass them. The desire for an uncompromising, inspired and courageous anarchist struggle is nothing if it stops at the production of text. To make more of it requires complicity, shared passion, a willingness to act. It demands also a desire for the struggle to grow, spread, find allies and accomplices. In this sense, complicity is not limited to relations between individuals, nor to collaboration among anarchists. This is a big part of it, but it also means that we collectively, as anarchists, may seek out accomplices in our struggles against domination, the state and capital.

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around our social circles. In so doing, we see “working on dynamics” as a reasonable alternative to struggle. When we reject activism, we so often see cynical hedonism as a reasonable alternative, accepting the rarity of any real anarchist possibilities, and lacking the initiative to create them.

We stand on a precipice over a vast, gaping trench with “the revolution” on the other side, blind to the mass of potentials that stand between “here” and “there.”

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perfect anarchists, but in the courage and desire to act, self-organize, learn, adapt, and spread sentiments and tactics, free of nostalgia and unwarranted attachment to failing strategies. Finally, the hope is that something said once, and well, is worth more than a thousand pieces of ideas coming out in different places at different times, forever leaving something to be amended. Though of course, no matter how thorough we might like to be, nothing is ever complete.

## II.

Much ado has been made about the false debate between summit-hopping and local organizing. We find in the end two tendencies each in desperate need of critique.

On the one side, we don't expect to find anyone who will defend "summit-hopping" as a viable revolutionary strategy in itself. However, the arguments in favor of organizing countersummits and convergences often return to a few points, mainly meeting each other and gaining experience in the streets. The strongest counterpoint is the repression that inevitably surrounds such events.

That being said, there is no strong argument against anarchists meeting each other and acting together. As long as we do not put absolute safety above the impulse to fight against the state, capital and domination in all its forms, there will always be repression. The more potency a struggle gains, the more desperate and vicious the response of the state will be, depending on the means and resources available to it.

Hence, the question becomes less one of convergence, and more of the summit itself. Here is where the bottom falls out. Opposing summits is based on the notion of showing resistance to the state's plans, to whatever group is meeting, whatever project is being discussed (free trade agreements, WTO, World Bank, economic forums, etc). In anti-globalization mythology, a degree of victory is observed in the moment when summits are organized in remote, easily fortified locations far from metropolitan centers. To wit, they are scared of us. Victory?

And the question morphs again: how difficult is it for world political and financial leaders, arriving in their private planes, to meet in Kananaskis, Alberta, rather than Calgary? Or, how difficult to meet by phone or video conference, rather than in person? Or, how difficult to hold a secret meeting, or a teleconference, in lieu of a publicly announced summit?

How difficult to say Plan X is scrapped, and go on to carry out the same plan, only without a name? These things happen all the time. So in the end, what is a meeting in the grand scope of power structures, of capital and the state?

Yet for the permanent traveler, little more is possible than to confront a meeting, to move from convergence to convergence. Even in the absence of summits, any event is in some sense a meeting to one who is always arriving—every impression a first impression, even when revisiting old haunts. A mass of people in perpetual motion is as useless as an isolate community, equal in their failure to become relevant, to develop any sort of force.

And the alternative: local organizing. At first glance, the argument is seductive. But what substance do the oft-repeated critiques of summithopping give us? Infoshops, Food not Bombs, bike co-ops, coalitions with liberal groups and NGOs; in other words, a thousand ways to build a semi-functional “radical” sub-society with pretensions toward autonomy. *Building a new world in the shell of the old.* Ignoring the fact that the “old world” is far from a shell, that industrial capitalism continues to function, utterly untouched by whatever radical institutions we might build inside of it.

Unfortunately, this discourse on the part of anarchists serves to reinforce the logic that conflictuality is the domain of a specific subcultural group, i.e. young, white, middle-class, male-bodied anarchists. In the name of inclusiveness and anti-oppression politics, the conflictuality of anarchist “others” is erased, as well as that of non-anarchist exploited individuals—a mass that eclipses the North American anarchist milieu, no matter how we look at it.

This discourse also creates the mythology of two types of anarchists. One type, with no engagement whatsoever in social relationships or any particular place, merely lying in wait for the next convergence, the next riot or black bloc call-out, to engage their violent fantasies and write their literary communiqués; the other type, abhorrent of conflict, living in so-called communities, building alternative insti-

## VII.

It is not particularly out of pleasure that we launch such an expansive critique. We consider it a thing of necessity, though equally necessary to recognize the limits of this perspective. Critique and self-reflection are valuable, but they can only go so far. Too much critique is more likely to stifle than to inspire, no matter how well-reasoned the criticisms. Writing always fits into a game of power. By necessity it takes positions, places itself at certain points within existing conflicts. We are always prodding certain spots, pushing eyes to look in certain directions, opening holes to peer into, exposing contradictions; unless, of course, one tries to please all, but then this is not writing, and rather wallowing. We hope here to attack two forms: the activist tendency against thought and toward action, and the intellectual’s toward thought and away from action.

At the end of the day, proactive ideas, examples and proposals will yield more than pure criticism. Yet we do not live in a vacuum of purely positive action. We cannot say that all actions and all ideas are equal, that “everything helps,” that everything we don’t disagree with is a concrete step towards what we want. Failed attempts do not bear repeating; stagnant forms of organizing do not demand our energy. Ingrown scenes that fail to communicate beyond their borders will not grow by some act of magic.

Hence the need for critique.

Clearly there are many positive examples we can learn from. This is by no means intended to displace the value of lessons to be learned from existing and past anarchist struggles and strategies, insurrections and lesser forms of social rupture. Only, better to take the lessons from the actions of others with a clear view of ourselves, and where we stand. No formation, no matter how courageous, how militant, how organized, ought to be exempt from critique and reflection. Even in hotspots of anti-authoritarian struggle, there are mistakes, failures, and internal conflicts as much as in the tamest North American city. The difference is not in some more advanced or more

# On the role of Critique

tutions, and systems of mediation and direct democracy. The first type resembles a kind of inhuman monster; the second type is composed of alleged real people, who actually live somewhere, generally reflecting middle-class values, rendering anarchism palatable to a certain projection of what popular opinion is.

In the end, the whole debate becomes more an impediment to anarchist struggle than anything else.

### III.

So what is wrong with local organizing?

This is a loaded question, as the construction of what we call local organizing is itself loaded. In one sense, the answer is quite simple. Nothing is wrong with it. In fact, local organizing is the most important piece of any resistance. It is the only form in which we may act directly from our relationships and experiences, forming collectives in our immediate contexts. Organizing on a larger scale, and over distances, immediately introduces representation, problems of communication, technological mediation, etc. Any action becomes more complicated, any process more difficult.

In this sense, the critique is levelled not toward the pure notion of local organizing in itself, but the paradigm of local organizing as a nonconflictual, directly democratic, charity-oriented endeavor (even as we hear the screams, *solidarity not charity!*). To fill this frame, we have the usual anarchist social services of Food not Bombs, community bike shops and Really Really Free Markets; then we get into the less charity-oriented projects such as co-op bars and cafés, collective houses and autonomous camps, which permit us to supposedly create direct democracy now, destroy hierarchy in our immediate lives, or even live anarchy. But let us dig a little deeper. Is it true that we really do want local organizing, only in a more pointed, antagonistic form?

And here we stumble upon the other problem. It is not a problem with the local itself, but with localism. By this we mean a fetishism with one's local context, an obsession with its uniqueness, a drive to organize an authentic struggle from that place, for that place. It is the notion of fighting where you stand taken to an extreme, in which one shuts out influences from the outside world, ignoring the forms of resistance practiced in other parts of the world. It fits nicely with the sustainability discourse: *eat local*, *buy local*, etc. To wit, if one can build up a cooperative, self-sufficient community, it would be effectively liberated from the state's machinations.

The logic can be expanded somewhat, to counter the critique of isolation. A federation of autonomous communities, each one populated by horizontal institutions, groups of people taking care of each others' needs, be it in terms of physical health, mental health, food, shelter, transportation. Bike co-ops next to community gardens, next to herbalist collectives, mental health support centers, and so on. Communication networks set up between these communities, to share information and knowledge. Finally, the vision becomes a somewhat expanded, more institutionalized version of the anarchist scene already existing in North America. Or, a slightly radicalized version of the "fifty mile diet."

Underlying this notion of localism, even in the expanded federationist localism, is the assumption that the state and capital can be erased by eliminating our dependence on their infrastructure. One would do well to recall that long before the state became as entrenched in our everyday lives as a dispensary of services, it still profited from land, labor and the lives of its subjects through taxation, slavery, war, conscription, mining, fishing, forestry, and myriad forms of extortion—and that in many places in the world, this feudal relationship still exists to a large degree. As much in prison labor as in the "Third World."

Here we find the limit of localism as a radical discourse, at the precise point in which solidarity and struggle disappear from the lexicon of a certain anarchist milieu. Localism draws force from a misuse of

out imposing a frame already over them, cannot be done within the confines of a subculture. These are questions that demand finally the abandon and destruction of subcultures, as surely as of society itself with all its pressures and cages.

This is not to say that the anarchist subculture is completely useless on all sides. Yet it is not merely the sum of its parts. To reject society does not mean destroying every person, every relationship, every ritual or practice that composes it; to wish to destroy capital does not mean the destruction of all tools, resources and homes, the scorching of the earth's land, as all currently exist in the form of private property. Likewise, to wish destruction on the anarchist subculture is not for the loss or closing of all its resources, its spaces, its materials; the ending of all relationships developed in that context; the forgetting of skills gained; the deterioration of ties between comrades in different areas. It is to wish the destruction of this subculture as a structure and a context, in order to liberate all contained within from its confines and limits. And certain components—skills to design and produce propaganda, to speak indecipherably, to eat for free, to spot pigs, are valuable outside of a subcultural context. When they are understood and used with intent, all are tools that may aid us in our struggles; when practiced unintentionally or out of silent coercion, they become merely another set of alienating, self-reproducing rituals.



at shows and political events, are seen to constitute one's autonomy from "mainstream society." Hence we arrive at revolutionary praxis as neatly pre-packaged deal, complete with a new socialization to cover up the first one.

Here, lines of flight are not uncharted adventures of individuals heading for the stars on stolen wings. These are paths clearly drawn, known distances, lines already mapped out, an easy trek from one's previous life to the anarchist scene, with loads of beckoning hands on the other side. Or perhaps scowls, most often depending on first impressions, on how likely is a candidate to fit in.

At the end of this "flee to attack from afar" discourse, we find ourselves failing at both. The flight of the subculture is not one of destroying limits and stagnation, breaking down social categories and patterns of behavior within ourselves, or pulling apart alienated social relations—a total negation of the repressed, scarred, socialized self. Instead, it flees the context and places of mainstream alienation, in order to reproduce similar dynamics, similar feelings of guilt and silence, similar chopped-up ways of interacting, only with an altered vocabulary and a fresh set of boundaries. Hence we abandon the places where we might share ideas, inspire and be inspired, to live on a cloudy plain above the city, only to submit to many of the same self-destructive dynamics we originally fled. And when it comes time to attack from afar, more often than not, this amounts to a mob of rowdy strangers shouting gibberish from the limit of the square, quite incomprehensible to anyone who happens to pass by.

In the end, the question ought not be whether to flee to attack from afar, or to remain amidst ranks of society to share tools and attack from within it; but rather, how to perform either or both to effect? From where can we hit our targets; and get away? From where, and how, can we not just attack physically, but share the techniques, the rage, the reasons and wishes behind them? And where, and how, can we attack and break down the harmful relics of socialization we still carry within us, as one more facet of an insurgence against all forms of domination? To pursue these questions to their ends, with-

certain radical ideas. The notion of revolt as therapy, articulated by situationists (viz. the absence of suicide in May '68 Paris), inverted and distorted into a pure discourse of mental and physical health. To see subsistence and "being autonomous" as revolt is little different from seeing self-therapy as revolt. To the contrary, communities of revolt on a certain level must be communities of support, but this doesn't mean that communities of support are by nature revolutionary.

Communities of squatters and punks are as prone to narrowing the scope of resistance as Eat Local advocates. "Resist to exist" as a rallying call gives up all potency when resistance becomes solely focused on the protection and maintenance of certain spaces—spaces which are only radical insofar as they act as springboards toward exterior struggle, and toward radical transformation of the individuals who participate in them (and radical transformation cannot be tied to a certain space, or a certain scene).

The anarchist project is one of constant dialogue between one's own position, and the world beyond. From the individual body, to the relations between individuals, the communities we form, the cities we live in, to the political boundaries that surround us and divide the world, to the world entire. The problem of localism is not with putting energy into one's local context, but with a preoccupation for a certain scale, a fetishism for a certain context. As individuals who wish to eradicate domination at every scale and in every corner of the world, knowing that different manifestations of authority are interactive and interdependent, that power does not stop at borders and boundaries—we must recognize the futility of overcoming power in certain places or forms, as much in discourse as in action. Not to suggest that it is impossible to win some level of autonomy, to prevail in certain conflicts in one space; but that as long as capital and power still operate globally, any liberated space (even a country or continent) will always be threatened and attacked from without, as long as armed power structures still exist in the world.

We find the relevance of locality to anarchist struggle, while avoiding

the traps of localism. The places we find ourselves, the relations we develop, the familiar alleys and fire escapes, the people we recognize on the street. Deepening connections and familiarities, developing affinities into *modi operandi* for action, these are building blocks for resistance. Without falling into the commonly Marxian mythology of an international revolution, we must be international in thrust, even as we develop our capacities to fight locally.

This means being enemies of power everywhere as we contest its manifestations around us. This means insofar as we interest ourselves in issues and events elsewhere in the world, we find and attack the myths and discourses of authority in those places (*viz.* Venezuela as proletarian paradise). It means finding deep affinities with forms of resistance in other places. Without creating chauvinistic standards, like saying that only self-identified anarchists are worthy of solidarity, it means breaking down double standards all too common in left and anarchist milieus, in which resistance group X in the “Global South” deserves our solidarity without an examination of their politics (and thus moving down the vague and slippery slope of anti-imperialism as a faux-ideology).

#### IV.

As North American anarchists fall into traps of liberal representation and misguided attempts to understand other cultures, notions of revolutionary solidarity (fundamental to anarchist practice) stretch farther into the distance.

As far as this relates to international solidarity, we can find countless examples. Support for and excitement following the “Arab Spring” while barely looking beyond mainstream sources and the media narrative of events. Sending cash to Stalinist groups in Oaxaca to aid the struggle, when anarchist groups exist but are simply less well-known. Uncritical support of Zapatistas or the landless workers’ movement in Brazil. The at-times fetishistic support for any resistance movement in so-called developing countries can be com-

#### VI.

If anarchists do not form a movement, then what? A school, a flock, a herd? A cult, a sect, a private club? A clique, a gang? A subculture?

The question is slightly complicated, in that there are many anarchists in North America who are not associated or implicated in its anarchist subculture, participating in its events and institutions. Likewise, in many places, the anarchist blends and blurs on the edges with punk, traveler, lefty activist, radical queer and various other identities or subcultures. Nevertheless, there is an anarchist subculture, with its houses, infoshops, benefit shows, convergences, Food not Bombs, and other projects.

Beyond its spaces and events, like any other subculture, the anarchist version carries a great deal of conventions, forms of behaving and interacting, rituals, assumptions, slang and specialized language, expected appearance. When challenged, these institutions are typically defended by attachment, by a certain feeling of comfort, a desire to feel at home and safe in our houses—much the same reasons for which many people work, watch TV, stay in relationships they question, maintain the same group of friends, never alter their sexuality after age eighteen.

Yet even as anarchists create certain spaces and uphold certain ways of relating for the same reasons as others do on their end, we have the added benefit of thinking our way of establishing these is revolutionary, that such codified practices steer us toward some kind of liberation.

Strangely, where the anarchist subculture is defended, it is often done so in the framework of organizing from within vs. attacking from without, maintaining one’s role in the system vs. abandoning it completely, to then act on one’s own autonomously from it. In this sense, living on welfare, dumpster diving, scamming, and squatting are seen to constitute one’s liberation from “the system”, and staying at home for days, or seeing the same friends around all the time

When we look at other anarchist notions, the disparity grows even wider. We are against private property, against control and repression, against colonization, against prisons, against work. These ideas are not reconcilable with the social order we live in. Sharing is taught to kids, and this may reflect certain anarchist practices—but so does expropriation.

The sooner we can give up illusions of what we are, and what support we have, the sooner we can determine who we really are, and where we stand. Surpassing idealized visions of bringing more and more masses into our circles, anarchists would do well to learn who their comrades are, and what they are capable of together. In the intense internal criticism that pushes toward accommodating a broader population, cowering at the mere thought of alienating the so-called public, one recalls the fin-de-siècle idea of propaganda by the deed. Through uncompromising attacks on this society of domination, a clear position is expressed; ideas are explored that would remain inert and seemingly impossible from the vantage of a tamed, orderly, polite social movement. The solidarity inspired by such acts is not one of words, but of more tangible sentiments, of a fluid interplay between empathy and acts of defiance.

Rebels hiding in the midst of this society, our ideas will never be accepted before the destruction of the social order around us. Yet the point is not to isolate ourselves or overemphasize the differences between anarchists and other segments of society, anymore than to erase existing differences in an attempt to merge our struggle with a much larger, more fluid and undefined milieu of “opposition.” We must be precise in our reflections, in knowing what we want, and how we may act toward such ends—in the immediate as much as in the long-term. For radical ideas to spread, we must be honest to ourselves about our positions, and clear to potential comrades about all we stand for, and why. Freed of the baggage of an illusory movement, for the free discussion of ideas, the sharing of techniques, and the initiative to move forward with what we have—so we may begin, once more.

pared, if not traced, to the anti-globalization movement narrative of a “movement of movements,” a loose, yet interconnected array of social movements against neoliberal capitalist reforms, spread across the world. This illusion, largely purveyed by the Academy and lefty Western publishing houses, paints a picture of collaboration between vastly different groups and milieus who have nothing to do with each other, typically have not encountered each other, and may even be unaware of each other’s existence despite their apparent association. In addition to drawing lines on paper between unrelated struggles, this narrative paints with a broad brush a spectrum of groups ranging from anarchists to authoritarian leftists to apologists for a glorified pre-1980’s capitalism. Depending on whose narrative we follow, this grouping may include many nationalists, including conservative and right-wing nationalists.

Even where there have been international encounters of anti-globalization groups and movements, little has ever suggested that these would not be easily recuperated by a reformist, “pro-democracy” milieu, eager to draw nationalism and industrial development into their arsenal, flipping the coin of US imperialism to find the same structures on the other side. It is not too surprising that the Left would seek to paint this picture of a broad and meaninglessly vague global movement against certain facets of modern capitalism. But for anarchists to fall for it? Really? The global economic equivalent of “anybody but Bush”?

The examples of vague “developing world” solidarity are the most prevalent and clear, but even in the West, even in North America we find the same phenomenon. As the recent 2012 Quebec student strike was happening, solidarity actions occurred in a number of US and Canadian cities; but what did they cling to? The casserole demonstrations, a theme copied from Chile where people came out on their balconies and banged on pots and pans to express dissent during the dictatorship. These actions quickly morphed into street marches full of people banging pots in various Montréal neighborhoods, and were specifically endorsed by a Liberal government minister as an admirable form of dissent. So, North American radicals

copy the most iconic and media-friendly action in the whole strike, the one which served most to pacify the streets of Montreal. Solidarity with who?

Or the notion that “sometimes nationalism is acceptable.” Like a population that has been oppressed is right to want their own State. Again, anarchists fall into the schoolyard logic of “justice” and “righting wrongs,” ignoring the evidence that State apparatuses and nationalist formations always involve repression, coercion and exclusion, that these are not consequences of “right” or “wrong” but are intrinsic to these social structures.

Solidarity is only possible knowing where one stands. If being anarchist is to each person to define, then solidarity is to each person to define, and between us it means nothing. To participate in a movement or struggle, or to contribute to a certain group or alliance, without a clear analysis of where one stands in that context, and how contributing to that group or struggle will aid one’s own struggle—this is charity. It is “doing a good thing,” and fits neatly in the construct of the responsible citizen.

Revolutionary solidarity is many things. It is writing to prisoners and supporting people facing repression, as much as it is direct attacks on the state and systems of repression, as much as it is communication (beyond anarchist circles) about anarchist struggle and repression. Not one of these is complete without the others. Revolutionary solidarity cannot be a purely defensive endeavor, nor one of support only, anymore than a revolutionary project in itself can be composed of merely defense and support.

## V.

An anarchist movement—does it exist, can it exist?

The question lies on the tail of another question: what is a social movement? Like many questions of definition, it is subjective, and

whole books could be and have been written on it. Yet at the same time, the answer seems deceptively simple. A social movement is a popular current that manifests in some way against the society we inhabit, and for a different kind of society. It is not an isolated group, armed or not; it is not a religion; it is not a political party.

To be clear: there exist two common notions of social movement. On the one hand are issue-based, time-specific social movements, against certain wars, against new laws, for certain specific rights (pro-choice, anti-CPE, etc). Such a movement could last a week or it could last forty years; its limits are not in time, but in the achievement of a specific end, or the exhaustion of will to fight for that end. In contrast are social movements with ongoing ends that cannot be achieved with a few concessions, in effect without broad social change—against patriarchy, against poverty, for the free movement of migrants. Of course, there are many groups and individuals, activists and theorists, in North America who attach themselves to these ideas. Yet a social movement requires not merely awareness of an issue or conflict, but active, visible opposition, and a certain degree of currency within the society in question.

The notion of an anarchist social movement often runs hand in hand with the attempt to show that anarchist values are values common in society, that we need to build bridges and show our true positive intentions to people, removing any hint of threat or danger, in order to dispel negative associations people have with anarchists as unruly, murderous, and without morals.

We do not do ourselves any favors in this way. While perhaps mutual aid and solidarity are things many people could relate to on some level, they are certainly not defining characteristics of our society. The opposite is far more true. Cheating, mutual exploitation and economic self-interest prevail—in material practices, if not always in word. The allure of wealth pervades every institution, so that poor and working people often identify more with the values of the rich than with those of their own class.